Aeneid book 6: a literary echo chamber

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When Vergil wrote the *Aeneid* he set out to rival Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, acknowledged as the greatest of all literary works and as models that could not be surpassed. But Vergil did not just want to write something as good or better, he also wanted to use his audience's memory of Homer's works to give depth to his own. He did this by recalling key moments from Homer in situations in the *Aeneid* that were both similar and subtly different. We can see this most clearly in book 6, where Vergil sends his hero to the underworld, as Homer had done in *Odyssey* book 11.

Book 6 is the pivoting book of the *Aeneid*, looking both backwards and forwards. A refugee from his defeated city, Troy, Aeneas has been caught between regret for the loss of his home and the exciting prophecies he has received – that it is his destiny to found a city with a great future, Rome. In book 6 he visits the underworld where he meets several important figures from his past, including his father, Anchises, who died at the end of book 3. Anchises gives him a vision of the future in a parade of heroes from the history of Rome, a history that will begin when Aeneas reaches his destined resting place, Italy.

Why is this vision necessary? After Anchises has shown his son the souls waiting in the underworld to be reborn for a second life on earth, Aeneas asks him an extraordinary question. His sense of purpose is faltering.

> *'Father, am I to think that any souls want to go up under the sky from here, and to be returned to sluggish bodies? What is this dreadful lust for the light of day?'*
>
> *Aeneid* 6.719–21

Aeneas' sufferings have drained him to the extent that he can't imagine why anyone would want to start another round of this misery.

Shades of the *Odyssey*

To emphasize the significance of Aeneas' question, Vergil prompts us to recall a striking moment from *Odyssey* 11. In that book Homer himself looks back to his *Iliad* and to the heroes who fought and died at Troy before it was captured, after which Odysseus, like the other victorious Greeks, was free to return home. When the living Odysseus meets the ghost of the dead Greek warrior Achilles in the underworld he comforts him, saying that while he was alive, the Greeks considered him like a god, and that now he rules over the souls in the underworld. But Achilles replies:

> *'Glorious Odysseus, don't try to reconcile me to my dying. I'd rather serve as another man's labourer, a poor peasant without land, and be alive on earth, than be lord of all the lifeless dead.'*
>
> *Odyssey* 11.488–91

In the *Iliad* (9.410–16) we were told that Achilles had the choice of a glorious but short life, without a return home from Troy, or a long, inglorious life and a return home. He chose the first. But the world of the *Odyssey* is different, and so are its values, and nothing illustrates this better than the dead Achilles' preference for life at any cost and in any condition.

When Aeneas calls the desire of the dead to be born again a 'dreadful lust for the light' (*lucis tam dira cupido*), the reversal of Achilles' famous words brings us face to face with his despair. It is as though he were responding to Achilles' words with uncomprehending shock.

In the underworld Homer's Odysseus also meets the Greek hero Ajax, Odysseus' polar opposite. In contrast to the crafty, adaptable Odysseus, Ajax was stubborn, unyielding, and dogged. After Achilles' death, his weapons were given as a prize to the man judged to be the greatest warrior of the Greeks. They went to Odysseus, and Ajax's despair at not winning the prize that he believed was rightfully his led him to commit suicide. When Odysseus sees Ajax in the underworld he regrets that he won the contest of arms because it caused the Greeks to lose a great warrior. Odysseus tries to be reconciled with Ajax, asking him to leave off his anger and speak to him. He is met, however, with a wall of silence:

> *'He (Ajax) returned not a single word in answer, but went his way into Erebos to join the other ghosts of the dead departed.'*
>
> *Odyssey* 11.563–5

Silence is golden?

Longinus, the great ancient literary critic, gave this scene as an example of sublimity, arguing that the silence of Ajax was loftier than any words he could have spoken: Ajax refuses to converse with the great wordsmith Odysseus. Vergil transfers this confrontation of the two great Greek warriors to a very different meeting, that between the ex-lovers Aeneas and Dido.

Like Ajax, Dido had committed suicide because of the action of the hero of the epic we are reading. In *Aeneid* 4, Aeneas had left Carthage, abandoning her at the prompting of Mercury, who reminded him of his duty to the future. In book 6, Aeneas, like Odysseus, tries to approach and be reconciled with the dead Dido, full of guilt and regret for what happened to her after he sailed from Carthage. But Dido will not be reconciled:

> *'She turned her head away, keeping her eyes fixed on the ground, her face no more moved by the speech he had begun than if she were set in flint or Parian marble.'*
>
> *Aeneid* 6.469–71

The scene resonates with the meeting of Ajax and Achilles in the *Odyssey*, but in this case we feel not so much the sublimity of Dido's silence as the terrible frustration of Aeneas' desire for forgiveness, or at least a second chance to explain himself and have her respond.

'Unhappy Dido, then the word I

> *hear was true? That you were dead? That you pursued your final moments with the sword? Did I bring only death to you? I swear by the stars, the gods above, and any truth that may be in this underworld, unwillingly, O queen I left your shores.'* *Aeneid* 6.456–60

Aeneas' attempt to explain himself to Dido brings one of Vergil's most surprising echoes of another author, not Homer, but one of the Latin authors that the *Aeneid* also recalls. The last line, in Latin *invitus, regina, tuo de litore cessi* (unwillingly, O queen, I left your shores), is almost identical to a line in Catullus, *invita, O regina, tuo de vertice cessi* (Catullus 66.39). But Catullus' line is spoken by a lock of hair severed from its mistress' head (Unwillingly, O queen, I left *your head*)! Catullus 66 is a translation of a poem by the Hellenistic Greek poet Callimachus, in which a lock of hair cut by the queen of Egypt, but now become a star, expresses regret that it has been separated from its mistress. How are we to reconcile the light-hearted tone of Catullus' (and Callimachus') highly artificial poem with the agonizing attempt by Aeneas to explain his reluctant desertion to Dido? It seems that the very gap between the trivial context of Catullus' line and the words of Aeneas that echo it expresses the hopelessness of Aeneas' attempt at reconciliation.

Epic deflated

Not only does Vergil's *Aeneid* echo with the words of earlier poets but the *Aeneid* becomes itself a reference point for later authors, who have their own uses for it, not always reverential. A good example is Petronius' use of this poignant meeting between Dido and Aeneas in book 6 of the *Aeneid* to supply one of the funniest scenes in his outrageous prose narrative (or 'novel' as it is sometimes called), *Satyrica*. Petronius' hero, Encolpius, is suffering from a bout of erectile dysfunction, which frustrates his attempts to make love to the beautiful Circe (a name familiar to us from the *Odyssey*), a woman of high status who has, quite unaccountably, fallen in love with him. At the height of his frustration he addresses a withering tirade, in verse, to his disappointing penis, but with no success:

> *'It (the penis) turned its head away, keeping its gaze fixed on the ground, unstirred, unmoved as on a windless day of summer heat, the languid leaves lie still, and wilted poppies on their slender stems hang down'.*

This passage is stitched together from lines and phrases out of Vergil, the first line being identical with Dido's response to Aeneas in the underworld, quoted above. The discrepancy between the moving scene between Dido and Aeneas and this ridiculous and sordid moment is what makes Petronius' scene so comically effective.

From two to three dimensions

Vergil too achieved some of his most striking effects by working with the discrepancy, as well as the similarity, between a passage in an earlier poet and his own lines recalling that earlier passage: Ajax becomes Dido, Aeneas a reverse Achilles, and Catullus' light-hearted flattery becomes Aeneas' guilty desperation. These rich and complicated relations between one text and another are what modern literary critics call 'intertextuality', and it is one of the most significant ways that Roman poets build layers of meaning into their texts. Without these literary allusions, the *Aeneid* and its characters would be more two-dimensional.

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